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# AWACS planes aid drug fight, senator told

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WASHINGTON — The military's most sophisticated radar plane was used five times last year for surveillance of suspected drug trafficking along the Texas-Mexico border, Sen. Lloyd Bentsen (D., Texas) said this week.

Bentsen said Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger told him that the Air Force AWACS (airborne warning and control service) planes were used in "Operation Lookdown" in September for three days of round-the-clock inspection of a 200-mile stretch of the border near Big Bend National Park.

The four other AWACS operations were concentrated along the Gulf of Mexico and around Brownsville.

"I am advised ... that the five AWACS operations are included in nine anti-drug radar surveillance operations the U.S. military has conducted in Texas in the last 16 months," Bentsen said.

He wrote Weinberger in February asking for details on the level of military assistance provided to law enforcement agencies in anti-drug operations.

Bentsen said Weinberger wrote back that three military services last

year flew nearly 3,100 sorties providing almost 10,000 hours of air coverage in support of civilian law enforcement agencies. In addition to the AWACS flights, U-2s provided aerial photography and various jet aircraft provided reconnaissance of airstrips used by suspected drug traffickers.

The secretary's letter said the military also was benefiting from the flights, which it views as training for pilots and crews.

Bentsen said he was unable to determine how effective the AWACS operations were in terms of planes being intercepted or arrests made,

actions that only civilian authorities can legally undertake.

Gov. Mark White, who has called for more military participation in the war against drugs, downplayed the value of the AWACS flights.

Despite the use of the radar planes, White said, equipment hasn't been made available to pursue smugglers who are spotted.

"If we don't have the pursuit planes to follow up the aircraft they may detect through the use of that surveillance effort, in a sense we're playing very expensive video games," White said.